Editorial

Lloyd Owen, Guest Editor

Since my last appearance on the editorial page in 2005, the freedom afforded by Jennifer taking over the Editor's reins has allowed me to finish off a PhD which had been marking time for too long. It has also allowed me to indulge in some grass roots work in Geelong — the proud home of the AFL Premiers for this year. What an amazing display of community backing; steady, solid coaching; and superb team-work. We also need to acknowledge the stars and those same ingredients which are found in Australia's World Champion netballers.

Jennifer is taking an academic break for this issue so it gives me a chance to congratulate the *Children Australia* team, and the contributing community, for the high standard of work evident in recent issues. It is heartening to see Australian practitioners and researchers breaking new ground in child, youth and family wellbeing, reflecting on their work and making the extra effort to disseminate results to an eager and 'productive' (in the sense that we are often asked to do more with less), but very needy field.

As 2007 ends, the news is fresh that the Australian people have moved democratically to change our Commonwealth Government. Outcomes on the ground remain to be seen. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has given attention to 'heart' and 'fair go' and commitment to action on the environment, education, health and industrial relations. Alongside his declared commitment to fiscal conservatism, members of his government are being asked to visit schools in their bailiwicks to find out their concerns. They have also been asked to 'touch and taste' the turn-away rates in shelters for the homeless. Good! I have been greatly concerned in recent months both by the number of young people I meet who, at age 13-14, are out of school (dropouts or excluded) and falling behind, and by the hard pressed systems for housing and supported accommodation which work on the assumption that demand will always far outstrip supply. How reasonable is that assumption in this society?

My own research efforts over the past two or three years have led me into exploration with a number of experienced practitioners, questions of good practice, and optimal services to support good practice with young people who severely challenge the capacity of existing services to meet their needs. It led to a number of propositions about practice and services which I hope to share more broadly in the near future. One central idea which emerged is that young people, in spite of the challenges they present, need ongoing access to appropriate adults who establish intentional relationships and engage in purposeful intervention. Another is that an optimal service system will be capable of timely, congruent, seamless and purposeful intervention. It will also contain a variety of service forms, flexibility in operation and community connectedness. It appears that there are many aspects of the way service systems are organised and resourced which run counter to the achievement of such

aims. It was also instructive to adopt as a vantage point the interface and overlaps of Victorian systems for youth homelessness, child protection, youth justice and, to some extent, services for mental health, substance abuse and disability. Working together has many facets and contains many challenges.

It has also been heartening this year to see a number of developments occurring in relation to residential care and a healthy resurgence of interest in its place in service systems. *Children Australia* intends to give some attention to this next year. An allied issue concerns some new appreciation of what it means to respond therapeutically to the pain and trauma many young people bring with them to our services. Jim Anglin from Canada visited earlier in the year and gave voice to his research into residential care (Anglin 2002) which identified the importance in our helping efforts of recognising the pain which underlies many of the young people's responses, the importance of a sense of normality, and the significance of congruence in the aims and responses at all levels in the service providing care.

The articles in this issue provide some very useful insights for practitioners and policy makers. Two contributions speak directly to the issues generated by e-technology and the information revolution. My recent connection to grass roots work was already leading me to think about social work by SMS as the thumb was exercised on the mobile phone in communicating with young people and parents. There is also the ongoing struggle to meet the demand for case notes and the plethora of electronically structured accountability requirements. These articles add meat to those bones.

The first by Marie Connolly and colleagues reports on some research on the English experience using the common assessment framework (CAF) and the information sharing and assessment initiative (ISA) which are part of major British government initiatives to improve outcomes for children in need and children in care. Some elements of these systems have been adopted in Australian services and similar approaches are being developed in our systems. The research identifies a number of key issues and raises important questions about intended and unintended consequences. There are a number of important warnings, including the dangers of drifting towards more information of less value, the neglect of obtaining consent and, at times, the withholding of crucial information. The second article by Susan Tregeagle reports on research which explores the use of mobile phones and computers, and the array of information and communication opportunities they enable among users of family support and foster care services. Many interesting issues are uncovered, including great variations in access and preferences for use. Positive and negative impacts flow from having it and not having it, or having it and not being able to use it. The complex digital

divide provides much food for thought and some guidance for action.

Jatinder Kaur explores the question of cultural awareness and cultural competence in child protection work in Queensland. Although it is clear that culturally and linguistically diverse families form a substantial component of the Australian population, attention to cultural perspectives in work with this group of clients has been limited. This study makes a useful start with a survey instrument adapted by the author for the purpose, and its application with a sample of sixty six child protection workers. Against a background discussion of potential insensitivities and the implications of getting things wrong with false negatives and false positives in protective assessment and intervention, areas for practice and system improvement were identified. These included better training for entry level workers, and more research to improve understanding of practice with and the experience of CALD clients in child protection. Also emphasised was the need for much greater capacity for access to appropriate interpreters and a much more sophisticated appreciation of their role and function.

Judith Bessant draws on the example of university student poverty to argue the value of ethnographic research as a tool for greater understanding and better ways of informing policy making processes. She raises critical argument about 'poverty line' approaches and the discourse of 'social exclusion' which have frequently been used in the debates about poverty in general, and what it means for students in particular. Ethnography elicits 'insider' accounts of social conditions, and attempts to bring out the meaning for the student and the complexity of interacting forces and events in their lives. Some criticism is made of ministerial perspectives and the political agenda of the last government and some of its informants. The new government should have something to gain from these perspectives.

The final paper in this issue should be seen as a follow on to the *Children Australia* special issue on leaving state care (Vol 31 No 3 2006). This study, conducted by Zoe London, Badal Moslehuddin, Philip Mendes and Judy Cashmore, set out to map the range of legislation, policies, programs and services in each Australian State and Territory specifically focussed on the needs of young people leaving care. This was to serve the task of understanding the various approaches and to identify gaps and issues. A helpful initial picture emerges of the growing effort being applied in the various jurisdictions to a problem which has been clearly recognised for some years now. It is clear, however, that more research is needed, particularly concerning the specific nature and outcomes of services to support the effort to achieve optimal service levels throughout Australia.

Lloyd Owen

REFERENCE

Anglin, J. P. (2002) *Pain, normality, and the struggle for congruence: Reinterpreting residential care for children and youth*, New York: The Haworth Press Inc.

PROPOSED SPECIAL EDITION — June 2008
RESIDENTIAL CARE: CONTEMPORARY ISSUES AND ITS FUTURE

A Special Edition of the Journal is planned for June 2008 that addresses issues relating to residential care for children and young people. Submissions are now invited for this Edition as outlined below:

- Commentaries that address policy, practice or are of a reflective nature
- Academic papers addressing research, evaluation of programs, policy development or practice
- Summaries of new initiatives in residential care
- Papers with a view to the future — Visions for residential care in the years ahead
- Reviews of reports or books concerning residential care

Other suggestions and contributions are welcome — these should be discussed with the Editor, Jennifer Lehmann (j.lehmann@latrobe.edu.au).

Submissions will close at the end of February 2008 to allow for review of papers (see author guidelines inside back cover).

Reviewers for this Edition are also needed. If you are interested, please contact Larraine Redshaw (lredshaw@ozchild.org.au).